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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000112

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM NI ELECTIONS
SUBJECT: CHIEFS OF MISSION ON ELECTIONS, DELTA SECURITY

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On January 17, the Ambassador met with a small group of Chiefs of Mission (COMs) to discuss preparations and outlook for the April elections and the security situation in the Delta. All present agreed that preparation for a credible April election is deficient, though it was noted that the state of preparations to date is not appreciably different than for the 2003 elections and has improved in the last few weeks. The Chief of the EU elections monitoring team noted that internal deliberations continue over whether to send a team and of what size and composition. COMs voiced concern over security in the Delta, noting that the situation has grown demonstrably worse since the beginning of this round of hostage-taking a year ago. The COMs agreed that the April elections provide an opportunity to restore confidence in the federal government's ability to address the concerns of the Delta people. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On January 17, the Ambassador met with Chiefs of Mission (COMs) and DCMs from the EU, UK, French, Italian, Japanese, Dutch, German, Finnish, and Swedish missions to discuss preparations for the April elections and continued deterioration of the security situation in the delta. The meeting was one of a series of such meetings in the lead up to the elections.

ELECTIONS PREP: POOR, BUT NO WORSE THAN '03

¶3. (C) Several COMs commented they have seen INEC registration sites and even posters encouraging registration in recent weeks -- a marked improvement from a month ago. Despite this increased visibility, however, all remained concerned that with only two weeks left to register voters, less than half of the voters are registered (INEC claims 30 million out of more than 60 million are registered). The Italian Ambassador expressed concern that there has been no indication of the potential damage done by a reported fire in an INEC computer room and INEC has been unwilling to respond to questions about the fire.

¶4. (C) The EU DCM was accompanied by the head of an EU elections monitoring team, Andrew Bruce, currently on a preliminary assessment visit to Nigeria. Bruce indicated that the decision to send a team, much less its size and composition, is still under consideration. He told the

Ambassador the EU will likely consider 10-12 experts stationed long-term in Abuja (arriving as early as March 1) and another 30-40 in outlying areas. Bruce said he has "serious concerns" with the state of preparations; however, he has not shared those concerns with the GON and indicated his report will be internal. On a positive note, Bruce said political parties with which he has met are committed to staying in the race, even if they perceive serious problems with the voters register.

¶ 15. (C) Several COMs voiced concern over rumors that the House of Assembly may take up a bill to postpone elections to August. (NOTE: Embassy contacts within the House have denied knowledge of any such bill in the works.) The Japanese Ambassador said his contacts told him that National Assembly members sometimes float ideas through the media to determine public sentiment before introducing them. He indicated he does not believe the move to postpone elections comes from within the Villa and, in fact, he believes Obasanjo is prepared to step down in May.

¶ 16. (C) The Dutch Ambassador expressed concern that statements issued following the April 14 gubernatorial and state assembly elections (expecting they will be critical) may push the GON to restrict the ability of international observers to monitor the April 21 presidential and national assembly elections. There was agreement that a carefully worded preliminary statement after the April 14 poll, focusing on areas that can be improved over the short term and without specifics on deficiencies, followed up by a more detailed final report after the presidential elections, would be advisable.

DELTA SECURITY CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE

¶ 17. (C) All present expressed serious concern about the

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continued violence in the Delta and agreed that the situation is worse than a year ago when the current round of hostage-taking started. The Finnish DCM expressed frustration that the federal government is "doing nothing" to address the situation.

¶ 18. (C) The Dutch Ambassador said an attack on a ferry en route to Bonny Island has left 2 Dutch dead and several more injured. The Italian Ambassador reported three Italian and one Lebanese employee of Agip, taken hostage on December 7, are still being held. (Note: One of the three Italian hostages was freed January 17 as a "goodwill gesture" according to media reports.) He indicated he personally intervened to stop a Nigerian military plan to attack the village where the hostages were being held for fear the hostages would be killed in the skirmish. The kidnappers' demands remain more political than monetary and he said the kidnappers are adept at using the Italian media to further their cause. He indicated several Italian reporters want to come to Nigeria; however, the Ministry of Information is refusing to agree to their entry. The Japanese Ambassador said he plans to visit Bonny Island for the opening of a petroleum facility that employs Japanese nationals, but he is concerned about security. (Note: Shell Oil has offered the use of its helicopter; the Japanese Ambassador accepted.)

HOLDING OUT HOPE FOR THE DELTA

¶ 19. (C) Despite the poor preparations for elections and the current situation in the Delta, the COMs held out the hope that credible elections in April provide the best opportunity for the federal government to restore confidence in its ability to address the concerns of the Delta people. That credible elections take place this spring may be even more imperative as the situation in the Delta deteriorates.

CAMPBELL